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## Cooperative learning through placemat to promote critical reading skill: what are efl learners' views?

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### Abstract

*Cooperative learning as an approach in the EFL classroom seems applicable and effective. As a consideration, whether or not adjusting the application of this approach in the classroom can reach the learning objectives, learners' perception is essential. Therefore, this research aimed to determine EFL learners' views toward using Cooperative Learning through Placemat to promote critical reading skills. This research used a qualitative design with 32 EFL learners from Tarbiyah and the Teacher Training Faculty of the Institute of Islamic Studies Langsa, Aceh, as the subject. A set of questionnaires and an interview were administered as the instrument to collect the data. In addition, this research found that EFL learners have a positive view regarding using Placemat as a medium in applying Cooperative Learning in English Foreign Language Classroom, especially in reading class. Thus, this research contributes to the addition of literature in EFL teaching and learning by suggesting cooperative media to be used.*

**Keyword:** Cooperative Learning, Learners' View, Placemat, Reading Skill

### Abstrak

Pembelajaran kooperatif sebagai sebuah pendekatan dalam kelas EFL tampaknya dapat diterapkan secara efektif. Sebagai bahan pertimbangan, apakah penerapan pendekatan ini di dalam kelas dapat membantu ketercapaian tujuan pembelajaran atau tidak, persepsi peserta didik merupakan hal yang dirasa penting. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui pandangan pembelajar EFL terhadap penggunaan Pembelajaran Kooperatif melalui *Placemat* untuk meningkatkan kemampuan membaca kritis. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif dengan 32 pembelajar EFL dari Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Ilmu Keguruan Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Langsa, Aceh, sebagai subjek. Satu set kuesioner dan wawancara diberikan sebagai instrumen untuk mengumpulkan data. Selain itu, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa pembelajar EFL memiliki pandangan positif mengenai penggunaan *Placemat* sebagai media dalam menerapkan Pembelajaran Kooperatif di Kelas Bahasa Inggris, terutama di kelas membaca. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada penambahan literatur dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran EFL dengan menyarankan media kooperatif untuk digunakan.

**Kata Kunci:** Keahlian Membaca, Pandangan Mahasiswa, Pembelajaran Kooperatif, Placemat

## **Introduction**

When people talk about language, four skills come to mind. This happens to English, too. As we know, those four skills, namely speaking, listening, reading, and writing, are considered essential to be comprehended by the learners in English Foreign Language (EFL) classroom (Achieng, 2023). Agree to the statement above, Hamliyah (2023) adds that all of the skills require the particular approach and strategy in the process of acquiring the knowledges.

At the university level, as part of academic literacy, EFL learners are expected to have a good mastery of those skills. Especially in reading, EFL learners are required to understand English text and discourse not only on the surface but also to understand the reading materials in depth to get both the stated and unstated information throughout the texts. Hence, they need to master numerous vocabulary words (Mukhtar, 2023). However, lecturers still have to put much effort into this since the fact indicates that the learner's reading ability is not really satisfying yet for the level of higher education (Azmi, 2020). The statement is supported by the results of a survey conducted by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2021, which shows that reading is difficult for EFL students, including Indonesian students. In the same survey, Indonesia was ranked 41st out of 45 countries surveyed with a score of 405 in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2021, indicating the low ability and Indonesian students ranked 74th out of 79 countries in reading performance (Musdizal and Wilymafidini, 2024).

In addition, Rafika & Bakar (2020) mention that people finds many problems in their reading process to get and clarify the information. The problems also happen to fourth grade students (Al-Muzayen, 2024). According to Annisa, N., Syam, U., & Mannong (2023), learners indicate some difficulties when they work with English text, for instance, difficulty understanding word meaning, main idea, and long sentences. In this occasion, we are not talking about reading aloud, but the ability to gather detailed information from and beyond a text that is written by the author, including the reasons the text is written, to whom the text is addressed, how the author's feelings and experiences, the functions of the text, the state and unstated information of the text, and others cognitive competency regarding the text (Liebfreund, 2021).

At the university level, EFL learners are required to have the ability to read critically; this is not limited to the students from the English Department but also includes those from other departments. Therefore, lecturers need to promote their critical thinking in understanding and in comprehending the text they are working on (Li, J., & Ren, 2020). As a consequence, lecturers have to facilitate the classroom with proper approach and method because students' cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor development is greatly impacted by the incorporation of active learning practices, highlighting the critical role that interactive learning environments play in attaining academic success (Asbupel et al., 2024). In line with the issue of reading critically, many researchers support and consent to cooperative learning as one suitable approach. For example, Mohammed, T., Yousif, T., & Ali (2020) and Jing, R., Lu, X., & Mai (2023) who had stated in their paper that one of the proposed approaches to learn language is cooperative learning. Sanaee Moghadam, Zeinab MA et al., (2016) mention that this approach dated in the early 1970s in America, and had been completing the considerable progress in the middle of the year to 1980s. In their article, they mention that cooperative learning is an approach to instruction whereby the learners sit in a heterogeneous group in order to solve a problem by working in cooperation with each other in small learning teams. Through this approach, learners can also perform a task given by the instructors who assign them to form a group and enable them to collaborate effectively with their groupmates (Chau, Meng Huat & Jacobs, 2021). All of the studies indicate that cooperative learning tends to be able to help students in the classroom to gain the knowledge.

Furthermore, Slavin as cited in Mousa (2013) promotes eight principles of cooperative learning. First is heterogeneous grouping, which means that the learners are sat in a group of numerous variables of teammates, including sex, ethnicity, social background, personality, level of cognition, language proficiency, and character. Second is collaborative skills, which are built by the learners when they work in a group. Learners who lack the skills in learning language can develop their skills through sharing ideas and knowledge with their teammates. The third is group autonomy, which can encourage learners not only to rely on the teacher but also to look for resources themselves. The fourth is simultaneous interaction, in which learners can speak up rather than focus only on the teacher's explanation. In

this principle, learners are placed to be more active and can perform actively as the representatives of their group or teammates. Here, the students-centered class is conducted. The fifth is equal participation; this principle promotes the same possibility and opportunity for all the group members to actively participate so the group will not tend to encourage the involvement of one or two members of the group only. The sixth principle is individual accountability. In this principle, although the learners work in a group, each of them still needs to be responsible for their tasks individually in order to be able to share knowledge, thoughts, and ideas among their teammates. The following principle is positive interdependence, which lies at the core of cooperative learning. This principle relates to the term 'all for one, one for all', which means that something that can bring positive things to a group member will also bring positive things to the others.

On the other hand, if something brings a negative thing to one of the group members, then the others will feel the same. This is believed to make the group members help each other to complete the task. The last principle is cooperation as a value. In coherence with the former, the term 'all for one, one for all' is adaptable in this situation where learners are not only trying to find how to learn, but they are also figuring out what to learn. All of the principle is related to Susanty, A., et al., (2022) that cooperative approach can help students to improve understanding and other interpersonal skills.

Cooperative learning as an approach to language learning suggests several models and strategies for teaching and learning. Among those models and methods, in this research, the Placemat strategy as a media of cooperative learning approach is applied to assist EFL learners in promoting their reading ability.

Bennett (2010) explains Placemat is a collaborative media that is used to bear all students' responsibility and contribution to the group. It allows the learners to work both alone and together around a single piece of paper in order to encourage them to solve problems and share ideas with others. Through Placemat, learners can brainstorm, generate, and introduce their ideas to find the solution to the problem they face, and they can write it on the paper provided to be discussed with their group. Furthermore, in applying the Placemat strategy, three or four group members are asked to write their responses and insight regarding particular questions and prompts given by the instructors. They then write their thoughts on a large sheet of

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paper that is positioned on a table. This aims to make learners brainstorm their ideas at the same time (Corbin as cited in Purnaningsih & Sariash, 2015).

In addition, Kielvin in Diana (2015) mentions that in using Placemat, some procedures should be followed so the objectives of teaching and learning can be reached. The procedures are as follows: 1). Learners listen to the teacher's explanation about the material; 2). Learners are divided into groups of three or four; 3). Each learner works alone first to do the task or answer the questions by writing on the paper provided; 4). The learners share the information and thoughts in groups to find the best solution to the problem they are working on; 5). The learners give a presentation about their discussion to the class. By following the steps of using Placemat, some advantages emerge, such as the learners being encouraged to share the topic enthusiastically after they set their knowledge on the paper. This helps them to prepare some notes before they have further discussion and presentation in front of the whole group.

In line with this issue, a number of previous researches had been conducted by some authors. First, Muliawati (2016) administered a quantitative research on the use of Placemat to improve students' writing skill. She selected 56 students from a senior high school in Banda Aceh as the sample for the academic year 2014/2015. She used pre-tests, post-tests, and questionnaires to collect the data. The research showed that Placemats could help students improve their writing skills, and the students responded positively to the use of Placemats in their writing activities. Next, Olaya & González-González (2020) conducted a research entitled Cooperative Learning Projects to Foster Reading Skills. This study's sample included 45 university students. The findings revealed that the project of cooperative learning can foster the students' leadership, decision-making ability, communication, and problem-solving. Furthermore, the students' participation, motivation, and achievement in language learning were increased.

Even though some previous studies have been accomplished regarding cooperative learning as an approach to language learning, research on the Placemat strategy in language learning is still limited and considered infrequent, especially in promoting critical reading. Recently, the use of Placemat to enhance essential reading ability is hard to find. This is regarded as the new thing in teaching reading for EFL learners. For this reason, the author feels ambitious about doing research

regarding the issue, and it is necessary to figure out what the learners think about the use of Placemat in promoting their critical reading, whether it is positive or negative. Thus, this research objective is to investigate the learners' views of the use of cooperative learning, especially Placemat, to promote their critical reading skills.

## **Method**

This study applies qualitative research with a descriptive design. There were 32 EFL learners as the subjects or participants. The learners were learning English in a reading course located in Tarbiyah and the Teacher Training Faculty of the Institute of Islamic Studies Langsa, Aceh. The subjects include both EFL learners from English majors and non-English majors.

Furthermore, because in qualitative design, the researcher plays the most important part who investigate and figure out the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014), then the researchers utilized a set of questionnaires encompassing 10 statements regarding the views regarding the use of Placemat in reading activity. As mention by Gay, L.R, Mills, G, and Airasian (2012) that questionnaire can be used as one of the instrument in collecting data for qualitative research. In this study, the researcher collected, analyzed, interpreted, and described the data about the EFL learners' view toward the use of the Placemat strategy in building critical reading through their responses to the statements provided in the form of a questionnaire.

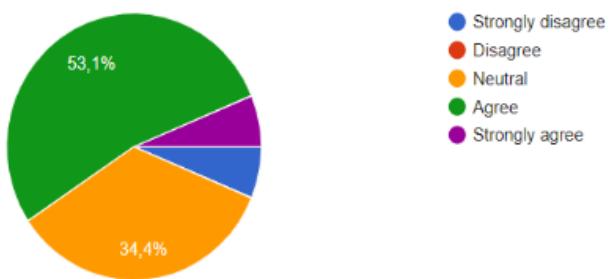
The reasonable statements and analysis were simplified and adjusted from Muhammad et al., (2017). The statements were put in Google form to ease the process of determining the percentages, and the researcher distributed them to the learners right after using this media in their reading class. Besides the researcher also conducted an interview with 5 participants with comparable questions to support the findings of the participants' views of the issue from the questionnaire.

## **Results**

Depending on the result of the Google form, the diagram below describes learners' views on the use of the Placemat strategy as the media in cooperative learning to develop critical reading skills.

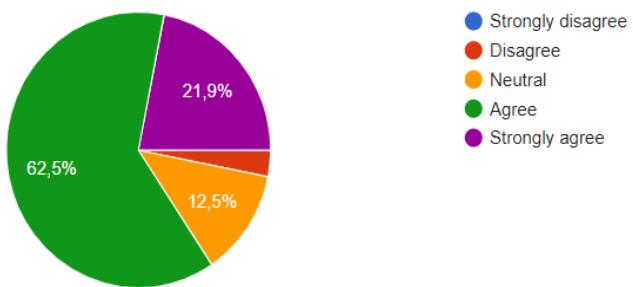
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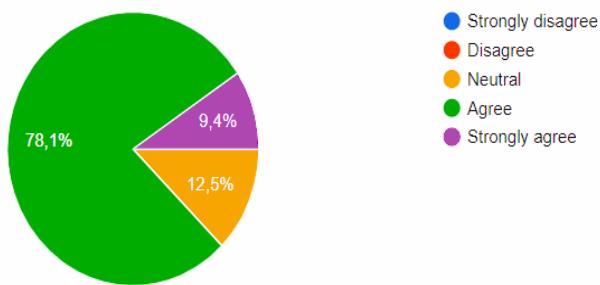
**Picture 1. Students' perception on their preference in reading English story**

Picture 1 shows the result of the investigation on the learners' preferences in reading English stories or texts. Of the 32 learners, 6.3% or two strongly agree that they like to read English stories, 53.1% or 17 learners agree, 34.4% or 11 are neutral, and 6.3% or two others strongly dislike reading English stories. The dominant number of learners who like to read English stories describes the learner's preference in reading activity in learning English as a foreign language.



**Picture 2. Students' perception on using Placemat to help them understand the story**

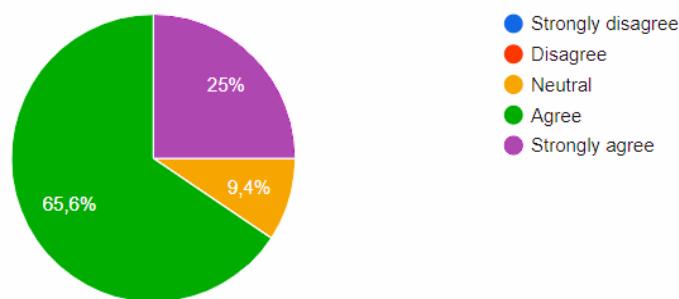
Picture 2 illustrates that there are 21.9% or seven learners strongly agree with the statement that says Placemat can help them to understand the reading material. Meanwhile, there is 62.5%, or 20 learners, agree with the statement, 12.5%, or four learners, are neutral, and only 6.3% or one learner, disagrees and feels that Placemat cannot help him to understand the stories.



**Picture 3. Students' perception on using Placemat in reading in enjoyable**

According to Picture 3, there are 9.4% or three learners who think it is enjoyable to learn reading by using Placemat, and they choose 'strongly agree'. In addition, 78.1% or 25 learners show that they agree to the use of a Placemat in reading activities, and it is claimed to be enjoyable. Meanwhile, 12.5% or four learners behave neutral, and no one disagrees with the statement. Furthermore, based on interview results, it is described that most of the participants had preferences in reading English stories, and they tend to like to learn reading through Placemat. These views were shown by the several interviewees as EV and FR said:

*"I like to read English stories and when I read the stories, I feel happy." "I like reading when I learn English, especially story like what we learn today."*



**Picture 4. Students' perception on using Placemat to share ideas about the stories**

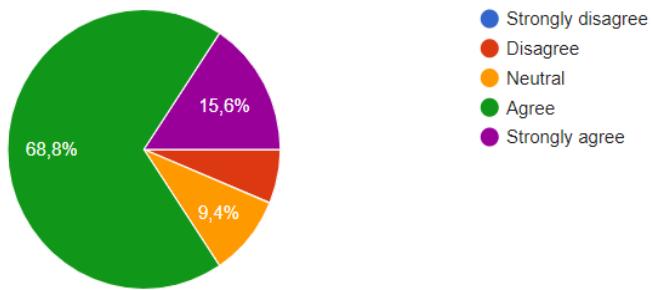
Picture 4 shows the learners' view on the assistance of Placemat in sharing ideas regarding the stories read by the learners. This statement describes the application of Placemat to help learners retell and find the moral value of the stories. Therefore, there are 25% or eight learners strongly agree, 65.6% or 21 agree, and

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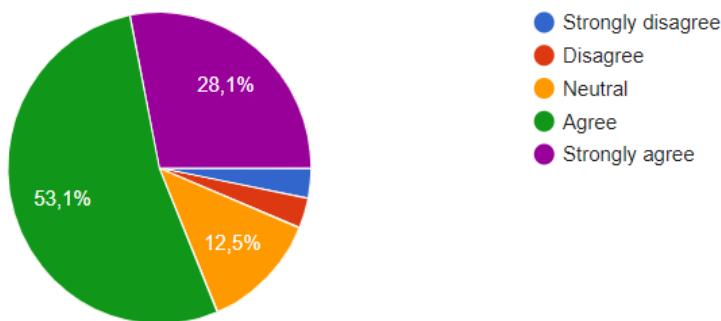
9.4% or three learners are neutral. No learner disagrees with the assistance of Placemat to help him share ideas about the story. In line with the idea, FR said:

*"I think when I use Placemat in learning reading, I can share my ideas with my friends in group when the lecturer gives us the assignment. I can enjoy learning and I think Placemat can help me to learn better in fun way."*



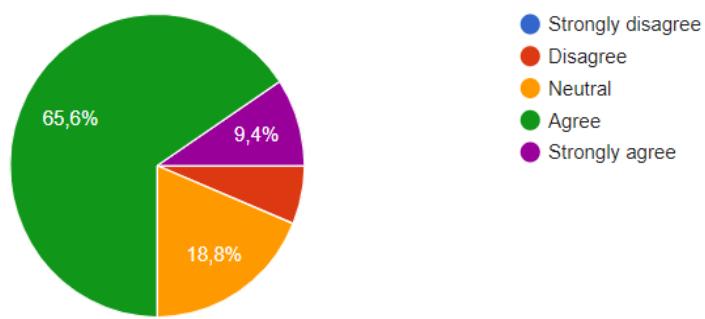
**Picture 5. Students' perception on using Placemat to help them read in group**

From the statement, we can identify the function of Placemat as a media used in applying cooperative learning in EFL classes. As the core characteristics of collaborative learning, working in a heterogeneous group is an activity that the learners should do, and they are required to achieve the goals of the group. Picture 5 then shows us the view of the learners toward the use of Placemats as a medium in working groups. It identifies that 15.6%, or five learners, strongly agree, 68.8% or 22 learners agree, 9.4%, or three learners, are neutral, and the last 6.3% or two learners disagree. These findings then tell us that most numbers of learners think that Placemat can help them to learn reading in group.



**Picture 6. Students' perception on using Placemat to help them to interact with friends in group**

Furthermore, Picture 6 describes what learners think about the role of Placemat in facilitating them to interact actively with their teammates. There are 28.1%, or nine learners, who strongly agree with the statement. Meanwhile, 53.1% or 17 others agree; neutral opinion belongs to 12.5% or four learners, 3.2% or one learner, disagree, and another strongly disagree. According to the elaboration of this finding, it can be said that although there are learners who disagree that Placemat can make the interaction among teammates closer and more productive, in fact, it is found that more than half of the learners agree that this media can help to build such a good interaction among their friends in the group.



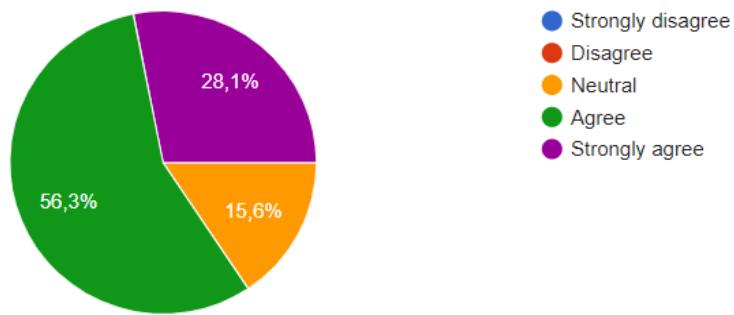
**Picture 7. Students' perception on using Placemat in summarizing English stories**

In addition, learners' views toward the use of Placemat to promote their critical reading can be identified by investigating the learners' thoughts on the benefit of Placemats to assist them in summarizing the stories they read. Picture 7 shows that there are 9.4% or three learners strongly agree, 65.6% or 21 learners agree, 18.8% or 6 are neutral, 6.3% or two learners disagree, and there is no learner strongly disagree with the view. In addition, the learners' view about the function of Placemat to help them in summarizing as an activity to promote critical reading ability are said by FR and MR as follows:

*"First, I cannot summarize the stories well. I write the stories again and I am confused to summarize. By using Placemat and I discuss and show my friends about my summary, I can write the summarize better after working with my friends. Because before we write the summarize, we discuss again about the stories."*

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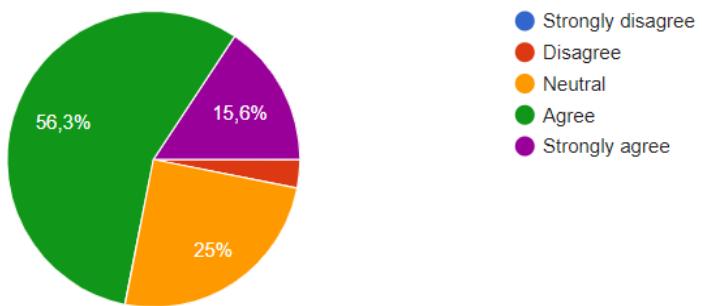
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**Picture 8. Students' perception on using Placemat to work with their friend in group to solve problem in reading activity**

From Picture 8, it can be seen that there are 28.1% or nine learners strongly agree with the statement that they could work with their friends in the group in order to overcome the problem that they face in reading activity. Furthermore, there are 56.3%, or 18 learners, agree with the use of Placemat in assisting them in learning reading groups. Besides, 15.6% or five learners are neutral and think the use of Placemat is considered acceptable to help them in reading. Picture 8 also shows that there is none of the learners disagrees and says that he could not work with his friend in the group to solve his problem in reading. This finding is supported by DF, one of the participants who told that she liked to use Placemat in reading class and it could help her in solving the problems she faced, as follows:

*"I like to learn with Placemat because it can help me when I discuss with my friends about the story I read. When I find a problem or question that I don't understand, I ask my friends and they will explain and we discuss together. After discuss, I understand and I think I can solve the problem I face after I discuss with my friends."*

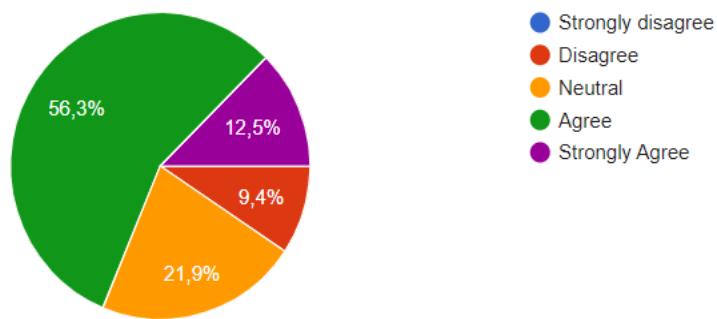


**Picture 9. Students' perception on using Placemat in reading is fun and helpful**

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Next, This research is also conducted to find whether the learners feel fun and whether they think Placemat is helpful or not for their reading ability development. Based on Picture 9, there are 15.6% or five learners strongly agree with the idea, 56.3% or 18 learners agree, 25% or eight learners are neutral, there is 3.2%, or one learner disagrees, and the is no learner strongly disagrees, which is meant that almost everyone stands together with the idea which says Placemat in reading is fun and helpful.



**Picture 10. Students' perception on using Placemat to learn other English skills and materials**

The learners' view toward the use of Placemat in learning English skill can also be identified from Picture 10 above. It describes that there are 12.5% or four learners strongly agree. Meanwhile, 56.3% or 18 learners agree and think that they are happy to use Placemat to learn English skills, excluding reading skills and materials. In addition, there are 21.9% of the learners are neutral, 9.4% or three learners disagree and feel unhappy with the use of Placemat in learning English skills, and there are no learners strongly disagree. The data collected from the interviews also show positive views of the learners in using Placemat to promote critical reading ability.

According to the findings above, the author would like to elaborate on some essential points regarding the learners' view on the application of cooperative learning through Placemat in fostering critical reading skills, such as sharing ideas in a heterogeneous group, understanding the contents, and summarizing the material. From several pictures presented above, such as in Picture 1, Picture 3, Picture 9, and Picture 10, we can investigate that the learners' views which are being researched are more focused on what the learners feel about the cooperative learning used in learning English, especially by using Placemat as a media to build learners' critical

reading. For instance, from Picture 1, learners show that most of them like to read English stories. As we know, learners' critical reading skills can be built on their reading preferences. Meanwhile, in Picture 3, more than half of the learners say that learning reading through Placemat is enjoyable for them. In addition, in Picture 9 and Picture 10, learners' feelings regarding the application of cooperative learning through Placemat in developing critical reading skills can also be identified. Most learners agree that learning reading through Placemat is acceptable and applicable in EFL classroom.

Furthermore, learners' views about the effectiveness of cooperative learning through Placemat in developing critical reading skills can be known from Picture 2, Picture 4, Picture 5, and Picture 7. From picture 2, the author can determine that most learners agree that Placemat helps them understand the stories more easily. Moreover, from Picture 4, learners say that they can share ideas among their friends in the heterogeneous group. From Picture 5 and Picture 7, we can determine that most learners can learn reading in a group and say that they can do summarizing activities easily by applying Placemat media to assist them in understanding the text.

Meanwhile, in order to build critical reading skills through cooperative learning, learners are required to work in heterogeneous groups, as mentioned in the previous section. For instance, in Picture 6, we can identify that most of the learners agree that they can build their interaction when they work in groups by using Placemat. Building good interaction among teammates is essential for overcoming the problem, which requires good teamwork. This is in line with Picture 8, which shows that this media can also facilitate learners' ease in solving problems by using Placemat. Those two significant aspects of group work are considered required to promote critical reading skills.

## **Discussion**

Furthermore, based on the interview results, it is described that most of the participants had preferences in reading English stories, and they tend to like to learn reading through Placemat. The students also mentioned that when they used Placemat in learning reading, they could share ideas with their friends in the group when the lecturer gave them the assignment. They enjoyed learning and thought Placemat could help them to learn better in a fun way. In line with this view, it is also

revealed that the use of Placemats in reading class could help students solve the problems they face. They discussed the story when they found issues or questions. Besides, Placemats could also assist them in summarizing the story better because they can work with friends through Placemats.

However, although a little number of learners mention that they disagree with the use of Placemat in group work, the learners' view on the use of Placemat as the media to apply cooperative learning in EFL classroom, especially in reading skill is considered positive. Considering the result, it is acceptable to use Placemat in EFL classroom, not only in reading class, but also in other skills. This is supported by the previous research conducted by Muliawati (2016) who uses Placemat in teaching writing skill and deals that it can support active English learning. In brief, students have a positive view of using the Placemat in reading activities as a part of cooperative learning. It encourages students to be more actively involved in the learning process by giving them the opportunity to express their ideas individually and then discuss them in groups. It not only enhances their comprehension of reading texts but also strengthens their critical thinking skills and ability to collaborate. Students feel more motivated because the method allows them to share their thoughts without pressure while also gaining new perspectives through discussion.

Furthermore, the use of the Placemat creates a more interactive and enjoyable learning environment. Students feel more confident in reading and responding to texts because they receive support from their group members. The collaboration built through this activity also increases students' sense of responsibility and confidence in expressing their opinions. The findings are in the same boat as Olaya & González-González (2020)'s findings about cooperative learning for the learners. Therefore, the Placemat is perceived as an effective and valuable method to be implemented in reading classes, as it promotes active participation and teamwork among students.

## **Conclusion**

Cooperative learning has been applied in the process of teaching and learning as an approach to building learners' competencies in heterogeneous group work. As one of the strategies in cooperative learning, Placemat is suggested to

apply in the process of building critical thinking skills. In the process of Placemat use, considering the learners' view is significant in order to understand the thoughts of the learners so that the teacher or instructor can provide an appropriate way to apply the teaching strategy used, to keep using it, or to substitute it with others. Henceforth, based on the findings, however, there is a small number of learners who think negatively; most learners indicate a positive view on the use of cooperative learning through Placemat in promoting critical reading skills. The published works' limitations in relation to Placemat in promoting reading ability cause this research to contribute to the addition of literature in EFL teaching and learning. Thus, the author recommends that other researchers conduct a similar issue on the use of Placemat in EFL classrooms, not limited to reading but also including other skills.

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